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Working with organized groups can be an effective way of improving school-community relations. Under proper conditions two types of organized efforts have proved to be successful -- parent-teacher groups and citizens' committees for better schools. Basic to the wise use of organized citizens groups is the need for the school staff to have knowledge about and to participate in community life. Administrators can vitalize parent-teacher groups by influencing the choice of effective leaders, by encouraging the adoption of sound objectives, by helping to develop balanced programing, and by teaching the groups techniques of planning. Citizens' committees can be made more effective is school systems cooperate in fact finding, policy and program development, and development of public support over a wide range of problems. School personnel should avoid becoming involved with groups hostile to schools, groups inept or poorly organized, or groups that set obscure and aimless objectives. A related document is EA 001 557. (TT)

Improving Your School-Community Relations Program

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Improving Your School-Community Relations Program

Improving Your School-Community Relations Program

by Gene C. Fusco

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WORKING WITH ORGANIZED GROUPS

The American experience strongly suggests that the most effective way to promote a cause, or to bring about some desirable social change, is to organize a committee. In improving school-community relations, the two types of organized efforts which have shown themselves to be successful under proper conditions are parent-teacher groups and citizens' committees for better schools.

Know Your Community

Basic to the wise use of organized citizen groups to develop improved SCR is the need for the school staff to have knowledge about and to participate in community life. The school administrator must bear responsibility for strengthening and supporting his staff to develop the following professional abilities:

1. *Firsthand, thoughtful acquaintance* with the natural environment and with industry, commerce, labor, government, social agencies, regional history, promotional organizations—with the community's life in its many aspects.
2. *Clear understanding* of the community study, service, and leadership movement in the United States and abroad in terms of its purposes, trends, and influence.
3. *Demonstrated competence* in planning, developing, and evaluating curricular use of community documents, local

audio-visual materials, resource persons, student interviews, class excursions, local surveys, extended field studies, civic-service projects, work experiences, and school camping.

4. *Growing ability* to work with lay individuals and community organizations in ways that are genuinely democratic, cooperative, and effective.
5. *Professional outlook* which conceives of education as a guided process of growth through which the individual progressively reconstructs his experience toward more intelligent and ethical action to improve the quality of human living.

These characteristics require direct community observation (field trips, interviews, surveys) and community participation (active work in community organizations, discussions with social agency representatives) and community contribution (civic-service projects, Parent-Teacher organization activities, coordinating council experiences).

Specific community-learning activities which an administrator can program for his staff could include the following, as suggested in *The Schools and the Community: A Communications Study:*

1. *Map the community area,* showing agricultural, industrial, commercial, recreational, and suburban areas; natural resources, water system, transportation facilities, cultural, educational, and civic centers; racial and nationality residence areas and types of housing.
2. *Make a comprehensive community survey* to discover local needs, problems, and resources in such fields as health, recreation, local government, occupational opportunities, art and music, home and family life, public safety and minority groups.
3. *Study community agencies* to learn their organizational patterns, philosophies, programs, and procedures.
4. *Work in a variety of community welfare agencies* in such fields as: children's welfare, public health, social case

work, community councils, police department, organized recreation, and youth activities.

5. *Cooperate with lay groups and organizations* interested in promoting better schools. This means sustained active participation in the PTA, civic-service clubs, women's welfare organizations, UNESCO units, and coordinating councils.
6. *Plan, conduct, and evaluate organized field trips* of various kinds, purposes, and durations with children of different ages.
7. *Plan curricular use of community resources* by developing several teaching-source units utilizing a rich variety of resource people, field trips, student interviews, and related documentary and audio-visual materials.
8. *Examine state laws and local ordinances* regarding protection, welfare, and education of children and youth. Discover to what extent such legislation is actually in effect, and discuss what additional laws are needed.
9. *Study the recreational facilities,* needs, problems, and possibilities of the community, and work with interested service organizations to publicize the findings.
10. *Study the sources of community income* in terms of payrolls, investments, developments, trends, and probable future.
11. *Study the community's financial structure* in terms of the public budget, taxation policies, bonds, interest rates, and personal finance companies.
12. *Survey the community's public-opinion structure* and processes to discover underlying local ambitions and hopes, fears and superstitions, values and taboos, and the actual social-economic-political-religious power structure.
13. *Understand current public-relations programs,* philosophies, and procedures, including those of community agencies other than the schools.
14. *Campaign with civic groups* for improved schools, health facilities, recreation centers, and employment practices.

15. *Become acquainted with minority groups and leaders,* and study their group histories, customs, contributions, and adjustment problems.
16. *Plan a "community-night" program* to depict the history and development of the community through song and pageant, displays and exhibits, and with child, youth, and adult participation.
17. *Plan a "community-resources day"* whereby educational, business, industrial, farm, and labor leaders may come to know each other's organizations better through field visits, discussions, and dramatizations.
18. *Plan and organize a school-community museum* in cooperation with interested local organizations and individuals.
19. *Discover the community's tension areas and types,* such as boundary disputes, residential restrictions, political and religious feuds; economic, nationality, and racial prejudices and discriminations.
20. *Plot the community's probable future development,* using normal expectancy figures in population growth or decline, suburban developments, technological prospects, and changing tastes.

Vitalizing Parent-Teacher Groups

Local parent-teacher associations may be described as voluntary organizations whose membership consists of teachers in an individual school and the parents of children who attend the school or school system they support through public taxation.

The vast majority of local parent-teacher groups are affiliated with the National Congress of Parents and Teachers. In recent years, the PTA has been subjected to some rather sharp criticism in popular magazines and professional journals. A prominent educator charged in an article appearing in a popular magazine with a wide circulation, that the PTA was a dull, mediocre, and irrelevant organization—and an insignificant force in American education.

On the other hand, PTA defenders refer to that organization as a unique and irreplaceable force in American education whose

support and cooperation is almost indispensable to the effective operation of the public schools.

A moderate view perhaps better reflects reality. The PTA is recognized by both laymen and educators as a well-established and expanding organization that has consistently supported worthy educational goals. But like all organizations that have grown large and bureaucratic it has defects which need to be overcome if it is to be more influential in the schools.

The aims of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers are:

- To promote the welfare of children and youth in home, school, church, and community.
- To raise the standards of home life.
- To secure adequate laws for the care and protection of children and youth.
- To bring into closer relation the home and the school, that parents and teachers may cooperate intelligently in the training of the child.
- To develop between educators and the general public such united efforts as will secure for every child the highest advantages in physical, mental, social, and spiritual education.

These are worthy goals indeed but such lofty aims are often vitiated by "pink tea and dull speaker" programs which alienate the very parents whose critical participation in school affairs is badly needed.

The means for improving the PTA are at hand and require only the application of time, energy, and patience. Some important elements for improvement are:

Effective Leadership: No organization can rise above its quality of leadership. This observation is particularly relevant in voluntary organizations such as the PTA where there is potential for flexibility and imaginative approaches in organization and programming. Administrators can work only indirectly to influence citizens in their choice of leaders but it is in their best interest, and that of the children enrolled in the school, to do so.

Sound Objectives: Another need is to develop sound and realizable objectives toward which the organization may be oriented. The overall goals are spelled out at the National level, but each school should identify its own and develop a means of evaluating whether it has reached them at stated periods of time.

Better Programming: Unbalanced programs are another source of weakness in local organizations. Reliance on movies, or lectures, or children's programs will debilitate the organization in time. A rapid falling off of interest will result, reflecting in diminishing attendance and support.

Fresh approaches to PTA programming can be developed by assessing parent concerns about what they want to know, focusing on the school instructional program and services in light of new trends and developments.

Management by Objectives: Above all, the planning sequence described earlier is applicable to the PTA movement. Such planning should be generated along the lines of identifying the *need* for the organization, developing realizable *objectives*, constructing *programs* for the year along with *evaluation measures* for assessing these programs, assigning *responsibilities* and finally, determining appropriate *funding* for the programs.

Citizens' Committees

Citizens' committees to improve the schools are another type of organized lay group effort which requires the cooperation of the administrator if it is to succeed. Such lay advisory committees are called by various names, such as "lay advisory council," "citizens' committee or council," "lay committee" or "commission on education." The most common term is "Citizen Committee" and this term will be used in this section.

Some committees are established to lead the community when a crisis or a serious problem faces the school, as when a school bond issue or school tax rate is to be voted on at the polls; others are organized to advise the board of education or to study pressing school problems.

A committee may also serve as a sounding board for the board

of education when no serious problem faces the school. A broadly representative committee, sensitive to the interests of citizens on matters of school policy and finance, can help the superintendent of schools interpret public attitudes on school issues. A committee organized for this purpose, with the school superintendent serving as professional consultant and the board of education maintaining legal responsibility for making decisions, is in a position to examine policies, present practices, proposed actions, and past performance of the school. The committee can then approve or reject plans and suggest modifications. Under these conditions, both the board and the superintendent will know when citizens are ready to undertake new programs.

Representative committees are generally organized to deal with a specific problem (usually disband when they have accomplished the purpose for which they were organized), and devote themselves to gathering information to deal with that problem. They usually maintain sound lines of communication with the school administration, school board, and community leaders.

Most citizens' committees have made valuable contributions to school improvement through (1) fact-gathering, (2) studying various school policies and evaluating those problems in terms of the aspirations and goals of the community, and (3) through mobilizing public support for major undertakings, such as financing a new school building.

Types of committees

The experience of local school systems indicates that advisory committee activities have been of several types, including the following:

1. *Fact-finding.* Studies are made, with the assistance of professional personnel of the school system, to obtain the necessary information relative to a given school problem. After the facts are assembled and analyzed, conclusions are drawn and recommendations are made to the proper school authorities.

2. *Policy and program development.* With school board encouragement and support, various policies of the high school are studied and evaluated in terms of the hopes and

aspirations that the community has for its children. Changes in policies and school programs that are under consideration by the board are similarly evaluated. The school board and administrators are kept informed regarding changes or adaptations in policy and program which community people believe should be considered.

3. *Developing public support.* Organized efforts are made to keep local people informed on the purposes and programs of the schools. Campaigns are conducted to develop community understanding and support for major undertakings, such as financing new school buildings and increased finances for school operation. Other activities are designed to develop and sustain local citizen interest in better schools.

The kinds of problems on which advisory committees have worked cover practically every subject related to improving local educational services.

Types of problems

Illustrative of the specific kinds of school problems in which advisory groups have been active are the following:

A. *School System Staff Personnel*
   1. Improvement of salary schedules for certificated and non-certificated personnel.
   2. Provision of "fringe benefits" for staff personnel.

B. *School System Organization*
   1. Reorganization of school districts
   2. Consolidation of small schools that are unnecessary operating units.
   3. Planning for new schools in rapidly growing communities; planning for special schools, such as a vocational high school.
   4. Planning changes in grade organizations of schools to meet particular local conditions and needs.

C. *Pupil Personnel*
   1. Improving methods of reporting pupil progress.

D. *Educational Programs*
   1. Determining the breadth and scope of the educational program needed in community beyond the require-

ment of State law; planning school program changes to meet local conditions and needs.

2. Determination of needs and planning for special educational services, such as:
   a. Programs for handicapped children
   b. Summer school programs
   c. Recreational programs
   d. Adult education services

E. *Auxiliary Services*
   1. Determining needs and planning for provision of pupil health services, school lunch programs, and pupil transportation.

F. *School Finance*
   1. Determining financial needs of the school system and planning for increased financial support.
   2. Determination of capital outlay needs for school buildings, and securing voter approval of school bond issues.

G. *School Buildings*
   1. Making surveys of school building needs.
   2. Planning of new school buildings and modifications of existing buildings.
   3. Planning for community use of school buildings.

The school staff and the committee

Citizens' committees are typically organized into subcommittees, some of which may seek information on what is taught in the classroom. Or it may wish to become enlightened about the use of new educational media, ungraded classes, team teaching, or new methods in the teaching of reading. In such cases, the administrator should make it easy for teachers to cooperate with the committee, for teachers are the most obvious source, and perhaps the only one readily available, for such information.

In some instances, school staff members are asked to serve on a sub-committee to help plan procedures for gathering information, processing it, and interpreting it for lay persons on the committee.

Though most citizens' committees make valuable contributions, some fail in their purpose. Indeed, some have done the schools

considerable harm. Some committees have an axe to grind, such as keeping school tax levies low. Still others are organized by small, like-minded groups of people who are not friendly to the school and undertake their task with preconceived notions about what is wrong with the school.

Some guidelines

The school principal and his staff cannot afford to become involved, or to actively cooperate, with groups that are (1) hostile to schools, (2) inept or poorly organized, or (3) set obscure and aimless objectives. Committees that are effective have certain characteristics. To recognize a committee with a high probability of effectiveness, the principal can apply the following yardstick. Does the committee—

- Make an honest attempt to be broadly representative of the entire community—geographic as well as occupational, cultural, economic, and political?
- Gather the facts, seek descriptive information, and base its recommendations upon a continuing study of all available, relevant material?
- Develop a written statement of purposes, focus on a problem or problems, and establish a target date for completion of committee assignments?
- Have the support, or at least the encouragement, of the school administration and the school board in pursuit of its objectives?
- Establish sound lines of communication with the public through the board of education, and, while the study is underway, send progress reports to the superintendent of schools or the board?
- Devote a substantial amount of time to planning, in order that detailed study may be given to (1) background of the problem, and (2) nature and scope of the specific purpose or task for which the committee is being formed?
- Set up appropriate plans for efficient committee operation, including (1) limits of committee authority, (2) time schedules for assignments, and (3) periodic reporting to the public?